

Dancemaker: A Tribute to Paul Taylor

A documentary directed and produced by Matthew Diamond

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16 March 1999

The recent documentary film *Dancemaker*, featuring the work of Paul Taylor and his company, provides an important, if limited, window into the creative life of one of modern dance's most accomplished choreographers. While for the most part the film is grounded in unabashed adulation for this creative genius, it allows one to see certain aspects of the artistic life of Paul Taylor, as well as the larger reality encompassing modern dance as a whole.

Taking as its axial point the rehearsal process of the dance company as Taylor creates a new work, the documentary branches out into other dimensions. The film travels through a variety of areas so as to present the viewer everything from vivid commentary on daily life as a dancer, to original film footage of Taylor performing one his most acclaimed roles.

While it is impossible in this forum to provide a concise retrospective on the work of Paul Taylor, he has made enormous contributions to an artistic legacy, producing some of the most exquisite pieces of choreography in the latter half of this century and one of the most well-known and brilliant performing companies in modern dance.

Paul Taylor is of the generation of choreographers that emerged from the Martha Graham "school." While he did have various influential relationships with other dancers, on a very fundamental level his work is bound up with the reaction against the aesthetic vocabulary and dramatic forms of Graham.

A pioneer in modern dance, Martha Graham created the field's first set movement vocabulary. Her technique extends from the use of the contraction, an inward pull initiating in the solar plexus, as the basis for movement. Graham's choreography has a heavy thematic orientation.

Ranging in topic from the Greek tragedies to Americana themes, her work is often narrative-based, stark and intense. While one can identify in Taylor technique Graham's employment of the contraction, it is not emphasized in the same manner. Choreographically, Taylor's lyrical movement and reinterpreted pedestrian forms, coupled with his sometimes plotless explorations, yield a gentle suppleness to much of his work--a far cry from that of Graham.

At the same time, his choreographic career situated him in rather close environs with the experimental practices of the avant-garde of the 1950s and 60s. A signature piece of Taylor's from that period is "Duet" (1957), in which he and his pianist remain motionless for the duration of the music-less score by John Cage.

Dancemaker leaps over this period of Taylor's creative activity in what I find to be a somewhat hasty manner, eager to get to the more glamorous choreography of his later periods. Unfortunately, this process is part of a larger tendency in the documentary. The film proves to be somewhat lacking in tapping into the more complex

intellectual and creative dimensions of Taylor and his work. This may be due in some part to the choreographer's reticence on the issue. However one gets the sense that director-producer Matthew Diamond consciously focuses on the haphazard, at times flippant, attitude of Taylor to the choreographic process, failing to probe or question in another direction. This serves more to obscure than it does to offer any real insights.

When presented with the complexity, depth and highly stylized nature of Taylor's work, one is struck by his ability to create a unified whole out of movement of the most yielding or the most turbulent character. The source of this, in terms of either choreographic choices or motivations, remains a mystery. While it is, for reasons grounded in the creative process itself, impossible to ever explain away such aspects, they are critical to a larger understanding of any artist and are a necessary component of a more serious examination. A good deal more could of have been done in the film to foster a better understanding of Taylor's technique both in movement and choreography. To state, as Taylor himself does, that his choreographic drive comes out of his fear to fail, is inadequate. Many people have a fear of failure. Most people are not Paul Taylor.

The more interesting and relevant questions are those that try to get at the forces that direct and sculpt such energy into art. The film focuses on the experiences confronting Taylor and the company members, with all other matters essentially being refracted from this lens, leaving many of these questions unanswered. However, this orientation nevertheless presents a fascinating glimpse of life in the company specifically, and as a dancer in general.

As the dancers discuss the multitude of injuries they have suffered--recounting everything from periods of being wheelchair-bound, to the stinging sensation in one's feet upon stepping into the morning shower--the viewer is confronted with the startlingly unaesthetic side of a career choice so deeply tied to the creation of aesthetic beauty. One of *Dancemaker*'s successes is that it presents the physical strains endured by the Taylor dancer within the context of an entire lifestyle marked by high levels of personal stress.

At the same time the intimacy demanded between performers, as captured by the film, imparts a profoundly sensual and human dimension to the art form and the people in it. It is with this angle that the documentary approaches the effects of the AIDS virus on the company, the loss felt by its members, and their turn to dance as the outlet to express this.

On the personal level, the film aptly reveals the contradiction between being in a field that is predicated upon the constant exposure of the most private parts of one's self, exposure to the most pointed criticism, and the realities of an intensely competitive and limited job market. Following this theme, Silvia Nevjinsky, one of the Taylor

dancers, emphasizes the point that the market for dance is incredibly small--"hundreds of beautiful dancers and no jobs."

During the documentary we see Taylor fire one of his dancers, expressing his reasons in a somewhat callous manner. In the March 14 arts section of the *New York Times* the fired dancer, Jill Echo, explains that while Taylor offered reasons behind her firing in the documentary, he never provided her with any explanation. In a letter to the editor she writes: "Unfortunately, in the modern dance world, the dancer has a limited voice and rarely a union or even a contract and therefore no job security. One can be fired on the spot for any reason. Dancers take what they can get because they are always aware that they are expendable. I realize this will not change, but it doesn't mean we can't say what needs to be said and must take it all in silence."

This dancer's comments call attention to another aspect of the dance world alluded to, but never developed, in *Dancemaker*: the contradiction and difficulties facing the dancer in a society where culture and the arts are subordinate to the market system. In addressing this theme, the film presents Paul Taylor's assertion that he is not a businessman, but rather a "dance maker." But while Taylor may wish to eschew this role, the reality is that a dance company is a business. Even for the Taylor Company, one of the most established modern dance troupes in the contemporary scene, funding is limited and costs are high.

A particularly revealing segment of the film revolves around the company's two-week season at City Center in New York City. Taylor makes the decision to use live music during the performance. In order to cut costs he hires an orchestra that he describes as perfectly suited to the company's need, and "nonunion." Through the use of various contract technicalities Taylor circumvents the City Center Orchestra. The orchestra's union, however, protests this.

Taylor defends his decision to use the nonunion orchestra as not solely an artistic matter--few would deny the richness that live music offers dance performance--but rather as a "moral" matter. After this comment the film proceeds to show various sentimental scenes of dancers coming into the studios in order to see the orchestra rehearse and there is a voice-over lauding the musicians for confronting the picket lines and protesters calling them "scabs."

One cannot be anything but sympathetic to the financial plight facing the Taylor Company and its members. Taylor chooses not to point to an obvious and omnipresent source of the problem confronting both the dance and music communities--the gutting of already limited government subsidies and public funding for the arts. There is never a mention of this by Taylor or anyone in the film, despite the fact that either directly or indirectly--through the constant need to solicit private funds, as well as the general conditions in the dance community--the company is increasingly beholden. While one does not get the sense that Taylor takes any pleasure in this confrontation, it becomes the focus of Paul Taylor's difficulties instead of the starting point of a more critical examination of the state of the arts world, for dancers and musicians alike.

Following the daily activity of the troupe, *Dancemaker* simultaneously traces the historical development of Taylor's work and the rise of the Paul Taylor Company and, somewhat unintentionally, the position this company has been awarded in the socio-cultural hierarchy. It is not of little significance that the company embarks upon a tour of India, invited to partake in the festivities revolving around the fiftieth anniversary celebration of the independence of this south Asian nation.

Diamond airs the comments of one dancer who speaks about the difficulty she had knowing that the government had built a special theater for their performances and then seeing the terrible poverty of the Indian people. Diamond captures another scene as we overhear a woman on the phone informing a caller that tickets for the Taylor Company shows would not be sold--admittance is by invitation only. Yet the director rather quickly shifts once again to the furious backstage activity of the shows, and finally to the jubilant ovation given by the audience.

The Taylor Company, because of particular formal elements, the lush sensitivity of the choreography--infused with the larger move in the modern dance world towards displays of technical virtuosity--is both wondrous and accessible to a viewer with little exposure to modern dance.

Simultaneously, when one reflects on the *Dancemaker*, one realizes that on some level Taylor's turn away from his more experimental works, and his heavily lyrical style in general, place him in a more "assured" position, garnering wider popularity within the general public and making the pursuit of financial sponsors somewhat easier.

This feature of Taylor's work and the position of his company could be observed in the premier piece featured at the close of the documentary, "Piazzolla Caldera." The tango theme, the movement vocabulary, and spatial relations were sharp, sensual, dynamic, invigorating and communicative. They were not disturbingly innovative. They did not refocus the view of the onlooker and push it in a new direction. They did not expose untouched elements. This, of course, does not diminish the accomplishments, value, or the genius of Taylor, but I think it is important in understanding him as one of the most widely followed and appreciated modern dance choreographers. Paul Taylor is a master architect of dance.

As a film, *Dancemaker* is well worth seeing--not in the least part due to the dancing and skilled camera work so necessary to actively capture bodies in motion. However the film is more of a tribute to Taylor than a multi-faceted, critical documentary.



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